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A LETTER TO A NEIGHBOR

BY JOSEPH S. AUERBACH

MY DEAR NEIGHBOR:

IT will always be a deep regret to me that I was unable on account of illness to be at the meeting on the Sunday evening before a number of you went to camp; but Dr. Pershing, who, like his cousin, General Pershing, is not without stern ideas of command, forbade my going. Deprived of that opportunity, I am, so soon as equal to it, writing to all the Selected Men of our neighborhood this letter, which is in part what I should have said if with you then.

No one, as he begins to realize what this world conflict means—and it has taken time for us all to understand it fully—can look into your faces or think of what you are about to do without an increasing emotion. Then, too, it is possible that I experience that emotion somewhat more than would a stranger, for to the fathers and mothers of many of you boys my father was for years in this neighborhood the beloved physician; and he put aside more than one offer which would have been to his worldly advantage to go elsewhere, because he chose to live his life here, among them of whom he was rightly so fond.

Knowing, therefore, the stock from which you have come, I can testify how you will acquit yourselves; and I am sure that my feeling towards you, in a sense peculiar to myself, justifies me in writing to you as one affectionate neighbor to another.

It had been suggested that I speak to you on the day of your parade, but those in charge of the entertainment thought it better that you have one evening undisturbed by any serious address. Nevertheless it occurred to me, and doubtless to you as well, that there was evidence then of the emotion I refer to, as the gentlewomen of this neighbor-

hood, out of an awakened devotion, came literally to serve you at dinner. What they did was intended to be symbolic of the higher service they and all of us would render you, in recognition of the service you are to render to your country and to the world. There was, too, an added bit of sentiment when at each table on their request you wrote out your names for those who had thus served you—and they for you their names on your request—so that you both might feel in closer touch with one another in the momentous days to come.

Indeed something of vital consequence had happened; for the day before you scarcely knew them and perhaps cared less about them, and it was the same, doubtless, with them concerning you. Then, in a moment, the spirit of brotherhood abroad in the land gives them towards you and you towards them a new-born sense of kinship.

Against such an army, when disciplined—of which the recruits are thus sent forth—no machine-made army, however vast, can stand.

The arrogant German nation committed the fatal error of presuming that its cruel army was an army to conquer with. But a conquering army is not an aggregation of units drilled to do evil things. It is a body of devotional men disciplined by resolve as well as by the manual exercise, having one heart that throbs with a common human impulse, and one soul quickened by a transforming faith. Such is this new and Grand Army of the Republic, in which you are to be the good soldiers.

This machine-made army, moreover, is nothing but a manifestation of German development, which in matters of socialistic advancement, such as governmental fostering of industry, old age pensions and the practical abolition of poverty, we had been taught to believe had so much to its credit. Now we must conclude that this so-called civilization was not “made in Germany,” as goods were made in Germany, to be sent to all the world for the world’s advantage, but made in Germany for German consumption; made in Germany so that the German conscience might be drugged with the full dinner pail; made in Germany so that Germans might be strong at the appointed time to rush forth in fury to send brave but unprepared men to death and captives into bondage, and to do the wrong compared with which bondage and death is a benediction.

We are told by President Wilson that the German nation is to be divided into its people and the ruling classes. May we all share this thought. Though remembering the unspeakable things the German soldier and officer has done of his own motion, as well as by command, to create within the subjugated territory of Belgium and France "An Empire of Death," let us resolve that for "The Day" of the brutal toast of degenerate roisterers there shall be substituted the day of an awful reckoning for the miscreant, whether of high or low estate. Let us welcome the coming of this day, not in a spirit of vengeance, but with the thought that these horrors shall never happen again, and that through such compulsory sacrifice there may be some hope of absolution for the German race.

The occasions have been many in history when nations have been required to defend the integrity of their country, the lives of their citizens and the honor of their flag. At no time, however, have the enlightened peoples of the world stood shoulder to shoulder, not only to defend what is peculiarly their own but imperilled civilization which a mad nation would destroy. You are like the Crusaders of old; and yet the Crusades, despite all their exalted chivalry, compared with this war, were almost visionary. For those wars of the centuries were waged to wrest from infidel barbarians the tomb to which so much of modern civilization is traceable, while your high calling is to put on the khaki of opportunity, to the end that you may do your privileged part not only in saving that civilization, but in establishing a new reign of justice and righteousness among men. Surely in such a crisis you could not think of exchanging that khaki for civilian attire, were the choice accorded you.

Even men who have forfeited much of the esteem of their fellow men and who must be strangers to many thoughts which urge you on, are laying down their lives without a murmur—not for their country, since some of them can scarcely be said to have a country, but for mankind. You have doubtless heard of the Foreign Legion in France. Into its ranks men may come, whatever their past, with not even the surrender of citizenship. France does not ask of these men "What have you done?" but "What are you willing to do?" Some of the riff-raff of the world are in it, but they have done deeds of which history will be very proud. Nor have these men, save in heroic endeavor, changed overmuch.

A short time since there was a description of this Foreign Legion in one of our well-known magazines. The narrator told how he had fallen asleep in a temporary trench, with the dirt piled high in front of him. He awoke to realize that a German shell had struck this dirt and buried him alive. Suddenly he heard the sound of digging and knew that his comrades were striving to rescue him; and by-and-by they succeeded. Later his gratitude was somewhat tempered by the rather humorous discovery that one of his rescuers had taken his money belt. Yet no grievance is harbored against the light-fingered benefactor; on the contrary, excuses are offered for him, ending with this all-embracing thought of our common brotherhood in this warfare: "Besides, he was a member of the Legion."

Realize, too, that along with the khaki, you have put on something you are never to take off and become the men you were. When you come back, as the most of you will, do not think for a moment if you are a carpenter that you are to drive a nail or saw a board or build a house, as you once did; or if a bayman that you will row or sail a boat in the old way, or if a farmer that you will guide a plow as before. No, into your life has come a vision, without which, in the language of Scripture, the people perish. In a measure it has come into the lives of all of us, as well as into your lives. Favored by the light of this vision men will not go about their accustomed walks of life with quite so many idle, aimless thoughts. Something, which though it seems new is very old, has been born again among us, signifying that more than ever before are we to take our neighbor and the State into account in our scheme of life; and to the extent that we all cherish this something of the spirit and compel it to grow, will the responsive citizenship of America become one of the chief and increasing glories of the world.

You must have seen more than the beginnings of this new impulse among your neighbors: There is Mr. Pettit, Chairman of the Exemption Board, to which this community can never discharge its debt of gratitude. He it was who, with eloquent voice, told you so persuasively what the call of our country means; and to the honor of this community for all time, of less than 400 men who have gone to camp 250 of them were practically volunteers, without any claim of right to the exemption many were entitled to. You were not so much Called to the Colors as that you Came to

the Colors. Then there was Dr. Pershing, the good physician among us, untiring in his efforts. It was the delight of both these men to give lavishly of their professional time to the embarrassment of their practice; and throughout it all they were ably seconded in their efforts by the unremitting, unselfish work of their associate, Mr. Kelsey. Nor must you forget what Mr. Adelberg—a stranger almost to many of you—did in opening his “Cedarhurst Hall” for each contingent of you as you went away, not only providing the dinner for you and the entertainment afterwards, but housing you there for the night in such attractive surroundings.

Above all, I know you will keep as a thing very precious the memory of the devotion of the fine men and women of this neighborhood who, in season and out of season, have sought to minister to you by their constant, sympathetic interest, and who have made a covenant with themselves and with you, that in no way shall one of the loved ones whom you leave behind suffer deprivation of any material comfort, because you have gone to serve your country.

Of course, there is no regret on behalf of yourself that under such auspices you go to the front; on the contrary, you must feel something like the thrill of a great joy.

“Somewhere in France” this or that part of our army is often reported to be by the newspapers. You, too, will soon be “Somewhere in France.” Well, suppose the worst—for soldier-fashion you must look that contingency in the face without faltering—and that one of you was certain he would be in France forever! This would not deter men like you. For in the hour of your country’s peril the alternative would be, if you had the choice to make it, to live the humdrum life we all more or less are compelled to live and then reach a ripe—no, it would not be a ripe, would it, but rather a rotten old age—and be buried in some unvisited grave in a neglected cemetery with a headstone telling when you died. Though if one of you is thus to be forever in France, be sure that there will be lines on the pages of history—as imperishable as the heroism of a supreme sacrifice always is—telling not *when* you died but *how* you died. For your country would write your epitaph.

This, however, would not be the end, for to die like that is not to die but to live. And when the most of you come back do not think for a moment that you are to come back without the few who may thus be forever in France. No!

Within your ranks, as really as if they were there in bodily presence, they will come with you—perhaps to the Hall of your leave-taking that you may be greeted there by some of us—to influence your lives and the lives of their families, and the lives of all men in the land, in a larger degree than you can ever do yourselves. I do not care whether one belongs to the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant Church or to no church or what his views are of an hereafter, he is a Fool who does not believe in the survival of the spiritual in the world; and he is a greater Fool who does not believe that the spirit of the man who dies that the spiritual may live is itself immortal.

Let me add this. Life is not to be all vision. There must be the admixture of sight, for if there be too much of either, men stumble in one way or the other. The sight you must have along with your vision is not alone a willingness but a cheerful eagerness to undergo the drudgery of camp training so that you may learn enough of the cruel trade of war to be fitted for the work you are to do. Otherwise, you are not likely to be good soldiers of the Republic but victims of your own folly. A sullen acquiescence in what doubtless may often seem to you irksome and unnecessary exactions will not suffice; but work, set to the music of a song, will mean that your patriotism is a faith and does not begin and end with lip-service and flag-cheering.

I had intended in my address to remind you of that wonderful Bible story of Gideon as illustrative of the need of fitness for warfare, and I asked Mr. Bumpus, our Episcopal clergyman—who spends so much of his time in doing things for others—to tell it for me to those at the meeting. Let me tell it to all of you, for it is worth the re-telling.

Some of you perhaps may not even recall it, for, alas, so few people read the Bible to-day. And though I do not wish to usurp the province of the minister and speak as a revivalist, let me urge upon you, whether or not you look upon the Bible as the book of orthodoxy it was once regarded to be, the wisdom of reading it at all times, and particularly now. For many reasons it is well for you to do this. Even if you wish only to have a vocabulary above that of the street corner, you must know the Bible words and Bible diction. But, believe me, you will discover much more in the Bible than its vocabulary. When at the suggestion of

Mr. Choate, who died serving his country, I once wrote an essay on the Bible—he told me that scarcely a day passed when he did not read this Book of Books. I shall be glad to send each of you, who will let me know that he would care for it, an autographed copy of this little volume; because if the book has any merit it is that of persuading persons to turn to the Bible and learn of its treasures.

Now, this story of Gideon is told something after this fashion; and as in so many other Bible stories, the characters are supposed to talk with God.

Over against Gideon and his army is the host of the Midianties, and he is not, as you are, even confident of the issue of the coming battle. He asks, therefore, for this sign from the Lord: that if in the evening he spread out the fleece of wool, in the morning the earth about the fleece should be dry and the fleece of wool wet with the dew. The sign was given him, and the story says that the next morning he “wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.” Yet he wished to be reassured and for the next morning he asked that the fleece which he was again to spread out should be dry and the earth about it wet. Again it was as he had asked and now he was prepared to lead the attack; but the Lord said that the army must first be sifted so as to know of its courage. Therefore He told Gideon to offer to all those that were “fearful or afraid” the choice to depart, and more than a score of thousands went their way. Once more Gideon was ready to give battle, but the Lord required now that the army be sifted again to learn of its prudence. Accordingly he was directed to take those that remained to the water, and try them there by the manner of their drinking; and all those who bowed upon their knees to the water, thoughtless of the danger before them, were to be put aside, and only those who caught the water in their hands and lapped of it, as “a dog lappeth of water,” with eyes to the front and on the foe, were to be chosen to answer to the roll-call. Then though but three hundred remained, these tried men went forth and prevailed.

So, because you are to go forth, not only fervent of spirit and unafraid, but disciplined in valor and with your faces toward the light, I, on behalf of our neighborhood and of all neighborhoods in this land wish you good cheer and God-speed.

October 27th, 1917.

JOSEPH S. AUERBACH.